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Environmental Justice = Social Justice: Southern Organizing Heralds New Movement

Abstract

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Keywords

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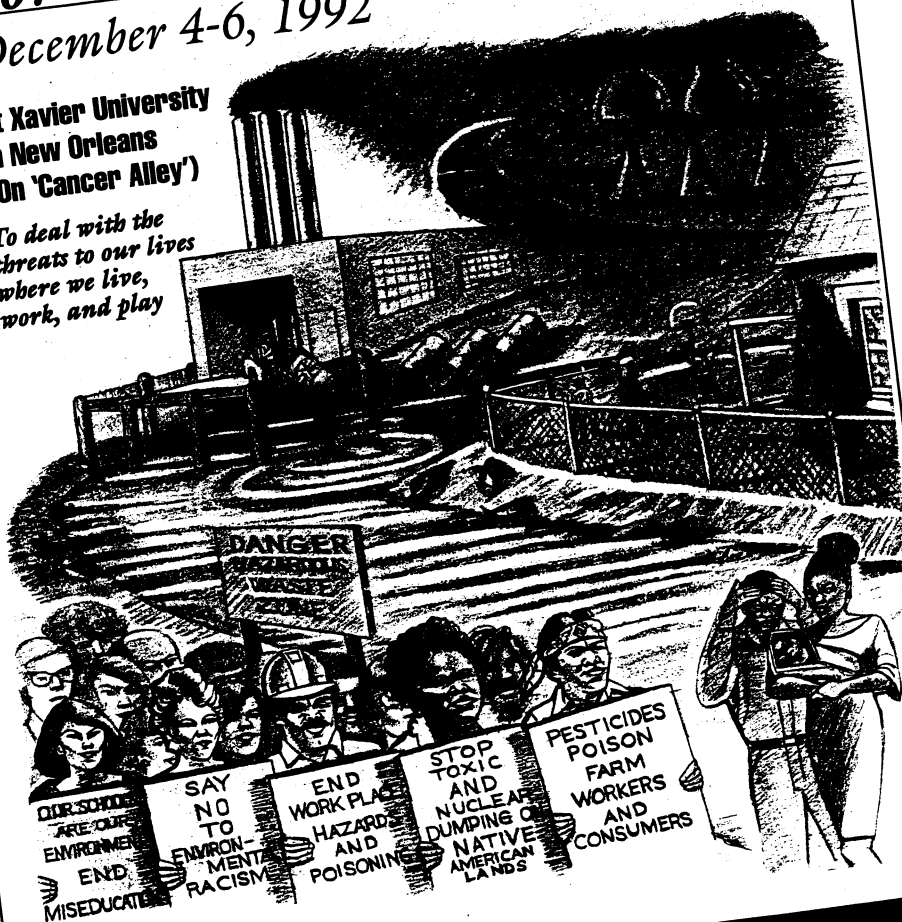
Southern Community/Labor Conference

For Environmental Justice

December 4-6, 1992

At Xavier University
In New Orleans
(On 'Cancer Alley')

To deal with the
threats to our lives
where we live,
work, and play



Environmental Justice = Social Justice

Southern organizing heralds new movement

■ *Anne Braden*

In December 1992, more than 2500 people from the cities, small towns, and countryside of 14 Southern states gathered in New Orleans for a Southern Community-Labor Conference for Environmental Justice. In one sense, the conference was part of a new environmental movement, for that's the issue that fired it. But in another sense, this is a new social justice movement, for it has redefined the term "environmentalism" to include all of the life conditions of a community.

People came to New Orleans because they're fighting for their lives against toxic dumping and industrial and military pollution which are producing wholesale poisoning of Southern communities. Charlotte Keys, African American leader of an organization called Jesus People Against Pollution in Columbia, Mississippi, laid out the situation: "Our people are dying. We can't take it anymore." Columbia is a little town near Hattiesburg which was never touched by the civil rights movement. Now, each Sunday almost 1000 people gather in mass meetings, as part of a drive that is demanding relocation and lifetime medical care for people poisoned by residue from a chemical plant that exploded there in the 1970s.

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At the New Orleans conference, people from Columbia met others who had come with a similar sense of urgency from other communities: for example, Native Americans from Cherokee, North Carolina; Latino farmworkers from Central Florida; African Americans living on top of toxic waste dumps in Gainesville, Georgia, and Chattanooga, Tennessee; both African Americans and whites fighting nuclear poisoning from the Savannah River Plant in South Carolina; Latinos in Texas organizing against poisoning by runaway shops located across the border in Mexico; white working class people fighting similar battles in Yellow Creek, Kentucky, Minden West Virginia, and other Appalachian communities. At least 500 conference participants were young people, many middle school and high school age, who are joining in this fight for clean communities.

The Southern Community-Labor Conference for Environmental Justice was a milestone in the development of a powerful movement that has been building over the past decade in Southern communities of color, and on a parallel but until recently separate path, in working class white communities. The movement first became visible in the early 1980s when people in Warren County, North Carolina, lay in front of trucks to keep PCBs out of their community. Soon similar movements were growing in other African American communities, and in 1987 the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ issued a landmark report documenting that toxic dumping is done disproportionately in communities of color.

Meantime, the Gulf Coast Tenant Organization (a coalition of tenant groups across three Deep South states, which hosted the 1992 conference) was evolving into an environmental organization. Its members realized that their lives were threatened by poisons pouring from chemical plants along Cancer Alley between New Orleans and Baton Rouge.

The Gulf Coast Tenants, working with the SouthWest Organizing Project in New Mexico, called for a broad anti-racist approach to environmental issues, which they called "environmental justice." These two organizations mobilized grassroots participation in a historic gathering sponsored by the United Church of Christ in October 1991: The People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. This gathering brought together 600 delegates from Native American, Latino, African American, and Asian American communities who adopted 17 Principles of Environmental Justice and issued a Call to Action against what they described as worldwide genocide against people of color. The event changed the center of gravity of environmental activity in our nation, and

signaled the emergence of a new movement that many of us believe offers hope to all our people.

The 1992 conference in New Orleans was a follow-up to that Summit, part of a year-long networking program to communicate this message of hope and to help people involved in local struggles break out of their isolation. In New Orleans, people saw with their own eyes that they were part of a huge movement.

LABOR'S ROLE IN THE SOUTHERN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT

Whether the New Orleans gathering as also a community-labor conference as it was billed, is open to question. Its sponsor, the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice (SOC), certainly wanted it to be that. But as a co-chair of SOC, I cannot honestly say that we fully succeeded in that effort.

In 1991, SOC had sponsored a year-long organizing project and regional conference on strengthening community-labor coalitions to protect the right of Southern workers to organize. That conference was co-sponsored by seven international unions and Jobs with Justice; union organizers and members were an integral part of the process. The conference itself stimulated new local alliances, which have continued. When we began our 1992 concentration on environmental justice, one goal was to build on and expand that community-labor cooperation.

On the surface some of this happened. Eleven labor bodies either endorsed the New Orleans conference or gave financial support. The Coalition of Black Trade Unionists also endorsed it and urged its constituency to attend. And certainly most of the Southerners at the New Orleans event were working people—or unemployed people who desperately want to be workers. Many of them were union members, back home. But I am not sure they saw this gathering as part of their "union" activity. And labor was not an integral part of the process as it had been in our 1991 work.

This may have been partly, or largely, because we did not do enough to make the connections clear. It could also be because many union organizers in the South do not at this time see themselves as providing motor power for broader social justice movements, particularly the environmental justice movement. Their backs have been to the wall recently, more so than in the past. Just organizing workers on the job, then battling to get contracts, may seem to them all they can do.

There are exceptions, of course. For example, the United Paperworkers International Union has a whole program encouraging

its members to work against community poisoning. The United Farm Workers in Texas is deeply involved in environmental and other coalitions. Linda Cromer, Organizing Director of the Retail, Wholesale, Department Store Workers Union (RWDSU), who organizes Southern poultry workers (many of whom attended the conference), believes it is impossible to separate struggles against workplace poisoning and community poisoning. She points out that poultry plant operators are some of the worst polluters of both. For example, Cromer says, "We know of instances where company representatives have taken poisoned refuse from the poultry plants and dumped the material into community streams in the middle of the night."

People like James Orange, who came out of the civil rights movement and now works for the Industrial Union Department of the AFL-CIO, constantly look for ways to bring community groups together with labor. The Furniture Workers Division of IUE consistently reaches out for community support, and gives support to community groups; for example, it provides printing, copying, office, and staff support from its Memphis office to a group fighting a landfill in an African American community in rural West Tennessee.

Willie Rudd, Furniture Workers president who led a workshop at the New Orleans conference says: "We are concerned about the total lives of the people we represent, and hope to represent. Even if we can achieve healthy conditions where they work, if they go home to poisoned neighborhoods, that's our problem. We have to be involved."



Another example of a union which constantly works in coalition with both environmental efforts and other social justice thrusts is the Mississippi Alliance of State Employees (MASE), a part of the Public Workers Division of the Communications Workers of America. Its members are also activists, for example, in Jesus People Against Pollution in Columbia, Miss., and in other such groups across the state. And they are part of a coalition that joins the concerns of the state workers they represent with those of people who depend on state services. Bill Chandler, MASE Organizing Director, says, "Unions win in the South to the extent that they are part of broad social justice movements."

Southern union history bears out this contention. Labor's strongest periods have come when it played a leading role a broad social movement. That was true in the 1930s, when labor was in the forefront of general social reform and made dramatic gains even under the repression of that time. That changed in the late '40s when the Cold War and internal red-hunts weakened the labor movement and it retreated from social issues, including racism. In the '50s and '60s, although national labor leaders came down and marched in civil rights demonstrations, Southern labor was never a part of this; in fact, in those days it was common knowledge that the Ku Klux Klan operated openly in many local union offices throughout the South. And Southern labor stagnated for more than a decade.

Labor began to revive as some workers in the ranks—including whites—recognized the power of the civil rights movement arising in African American communities. For example, at one point, white South Carolina steelworkers traveled to Atlanta to seek help from an African American civil rights group—and got it. Civil rights laws were opening jobs to Blacks in industries like Textile that had previously been all-white. They brought their militancy, organizing skills, and struggles into the shops, and vital new organizing drives developed.

Ever since then, it's been when and where union and community came together that victories were won. For example, the Delta Pride catfish workers in Mississippi won their strike in 1991 because of two elements: a determined workforce and a Southwide boycott organized by community-based groups like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and SOC. It seems likely that more people in Southern unions will soon see that their future is intertwined with the new environmental justice movement that is mushrooming all around them.

Unlike some traditional environmental organizations, this new movement does not ignore the question of what happens to jobs

when environmental regulations are enforced. As Tony Mazzocchi of the Oil, Chemical, & Atomic Workers (OCAW), stressed in a workshop at the New Orleans conference, there is no easy answer. Building an ecologically sound economy will involve a major transition for our society. That means, Mazzocchi said, launching programs big and imaginative enough to meet needs of working people during the transition. OCAW proposes a Superfund for Workers, modeled on the GI Bill after World War II, to provide income and educational benefits to workers while they learn new skills and professions. Many community people at the conference had not heard this idea before, but as working people building a broad social justice movement, they responded and are incorporating the Superfund proposal into their organizing agendas. This energy from the grassroots provides the motor power that can bring labor proposals like the Superfund to greater national attention.

CROSSING THE COLOR LINE

Another thing union activists can get from this movement is some clues to organizing across the color line. That remains a formidable challenge in the environmental justice movement also. But right now this may be the most racially-diverse movement in the country.

The New Orleans conference was about 70 percent people of color and 30 percent white. This movement is based most strongly in communities of color, but it is very open to white participation. The question of people-of-color leadership still causes some problems for many whites, especially when it's discussed in theory. For example, in New Orleans, some middle class white environmentalists were still asking how they can get people of color involved in "their" organizations rather than how they can link up with movements led by people of color.

Working class whites have shown more receptivity to this kind of coalition-building. For example, Jim Branson, former miner and union organizer, now a community organizer in Appalachia, notes that working class whites have long had problems similar to those of people of color in trying to work in coalitions with middle class whites. They tend to get left out when the chips are down.

When SOC first began bringing Deep South African Americans together with working class whites in Appalachia, there were severe tensions. When African Americans said their communities are the ones most targeted for poisoning, some people thought they were saying "toxics don't kill white people." The whites knew

that was not so, because their loved ones were dying too. But nobody was saying that; it was a communications problem. And communication problems often get resolved best as people act together.

That began to happen in the Southeast in September 1992 as SOC brought 100 people together from communities of color and white working class areas at an EPA-sponsored conference in Atlanta which had been designed to quiet down the new movement. People sat in a circle, Native American style, and shared their stories. They then proceeded to take over the conference, presented 42 demands for immediate clean-up in their communities, and formed a task force which has continued to work together and negotiate with EPA. That task force includes both people of color and whites, with people of color clearly in the leadership and everyone participating. No one has yet questioned the leadership. The overriding thing is that the coalition is going somewhere and is strengthening people who previously fought losing battles alone.

One thing is clear. The new environmental justice movement will grow—and, in the opinion of many observers, it will shake the country even more profoundly than did the civil rights movement of the '50s and '60s. But it will be stronger and will bring change more quickly if the labor movement and other important allies join now, in the early stages of the struggle. ■

RESOURCES

"Understanding the Conflict between Jobs and the Environment: The Proposal for a Superfund," by the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers, P.O. Box 281200, Lakewood, CO 80228.

"Southern Manifesto for Environmental and Economic Justice," is the document produced from the December 1992 conference, available from SOC at PO Box 10518, Atlanta, GA 30310